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### Any Amusement at All

Of all the works written by Oscar Wilde, the comedic play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is perhaps his most famous and most easily-recognizable. It is also a well-known work of satire, in which Wilde often subtly mocks the Victorian ways of life and society. About the play, Wilde commented in an interview: “It has as its philosophy...that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” (as quoted in Greenblatt, 2006, p. 2222). Simply stated, Wilde’s main purpose of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was to satirize the seriousness with which many Victorians, and also most Victorian literature, were so familiar.

Wilde most frequently accomplishes this by stressing the seriousness the characters themselves display. This is especially true in the play’s opening act, during which the beginnings of the play’s humorous plot are laid out for the audience. The exchanges between Algernon and Jack are particularly mocking when they discuss the imaginary egos that they have both created. Algernon flippantly sums up the discussion:

“You have invented a very useful young brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose.”

(2226)

This simple synopsis of both Jack and Algernon's deceptions is exceptional evidence of Wilde's poking fun at the Victorian emphasis on morality. By creating alter egos who grant them opportunities to occasionally escape from their social obligations, both Jack and Algernon are thumbing their noses at the idea of morally truthful and well-to-do Victorian gentlemen. Jack, however, shows some desire to step back towards that ideal when he decides that he will arrange for his imaginary brother to meet his unfortunate and equally imaginary end.

Another moment in the opening act during which Wilde exaggerates the Victorians' typical seriousness is Lady Bracknell's interrogation of Jack once she learns he has attempted to propose to her daughter Gwendolen. Her numerous, somewhat intrusive questions and snide comments about Jack's responses – especially those regarding the respectability of the locations of his country home or town house – overemphasize the importance many upper-class Victorians placed on one's social status.

The second act of *The Importance of Being Earnest* also has several moments in which Wilde satirizes Victorian solemnity through exaggeration. One such moment occurs during the exchange Algernon has with young Cecily while he's posing as the fictitious Ernest Worthing and knows absolutely nothing about their 'relationship' and subsequent 'engagement,' and the girl is calmly explaining everything to him, going so far as to remind him that she had indeed written all his letters to her. By not allowing Cecily's character to fully catch on to Algernon's ruse, Wilde is pointing out the sheer absurdity of the situation as well as the surprisingly naïve girl. Perhaps one of the most serious yet most absurd lines in the exchange belongs to young Cecily, after Algernon has left to arrange his new christening: "What an impetuous boy he is! I like his hair so. I must enter his proposal in my diary" (p. 2247). Her childlike albeit sincere comment only serves to further mock the gravity the Victorians seemed to favor.

Also exaggerating that gravity is the incident between Cecily and Gwendolen when they learn they are both engaged to Ernest Worthing (although neither one realize Jack or Algernon's deceptions). Rather than bursting out in an ugly quarrel, the two women instead remain courteous to one another and calmly lay claims to their particular Ernest. However, while they're waiting for their Ernest to return and having tea together, they both become passive aggressive towards each other until finally Cecily goes too far in serving Gwendolen everything she does not want. It is only then that the ladies show a passionate form of emotion, which is quickly interrupted, perhaps largely so Wilde can quickly return the women to an alliance against their dishonest suitors.

Once Cecily and Gwendolen have allied themselves against Algernon and Jack, however, Wilde presents the reader with one of the most satirical and humorous moments in the play: Jack and Algernon's muffin quarrel. The men – rather than discussing the lies they've told to the women they love – turn to mildly bickering about whether or not Algernon's eating muffins at such a moment is a heartless act; according to the stage directions Wilde has written into the play, however, there is no indication that they ever raise their voices as if they were truly quarreling or bickering. The only indication of any indignation for either man is their tugging the muffin dish away from the other. This may imply that even in the midst of what should be an absurd quarrel between two grown men (later revealed to be brothers, nonetheless), both men still maintain some sense of decorum and solemnity.

Jack and Algernon's muffin quarrel is also some of the most direct evidence for Wilde's stated theme of the play – “It has as its philosophy...that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” (p. 2222). The juxtaposition of Algernon's calm, rather flippant discussion about eating muffins and of Jack's

agitation at Algernon and their conflicting christenings plainly highlights Wilde's belief of being serious about trivial things and being trivial about serious things.

In the third and final act, there is one moment in particular during which Wilde satirizes Victorian seriousness. After learning about his true heritage, Jack – Ernest Moncrieff actually, as it is revealed to both the audience and Jack himself – only seems to celebrate the news because it means Gwendolen has finally forgiven him and will marry him (because his name is truthfully Ernest, not John). Lady Bracknell, now Jack's aunt as well as Algernon's, comments to him, "My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality," to which Jack flippantly replies, "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest" (p. 2263).

The pun in the play's title playing off the homophonous relationship between the name Ernest and the quality of being earnest is just another way that Wilde mocks the socially-accepted Victorian gravity. In a play not intended as a satire, the line (or title) would serve as a serious reminder on what was considered valuable to Victorian society, but for Wilde, the very pun of Ernest versus earnest scoffs at the mere idea of seriousness, reminding the audience that even something so important as a valued Victorian quality is not above a little mockery.

Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde reminds us that very little in this life is so serious that it cannot be taken trivially. Indeed, he reveals this very idea through Algernon, one of the most entertaining characters in the play: "Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life" (p. 2252).

## Works Cited

Greenblatt, S. (Ed.). (2006). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors* (8th ed.) (Vol. B). New York: Norton & Company.